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AUTHOR Wildfogel, Jeffrey: Hastorf, Albert H.
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ABSTRACT

Three studies investigating the behavior of nonhandicapped people in the presence of handicapped individuals and a possible tactic for reducing the nonhandicapped individual's discomfort are reported. In Studies One and Two, nonhandicapped Ss watched two videotapes of paraplegics in wheelchairs being interviewed. Each S then chose the handicapped person with whom he/she preferred to work. In Study One, Ss significantly preferred a handicapped person who acknowledged his handicap to one who did not acknowledge his handicap. In Study Two, Ss still preferred the acknowledging handicapped individual over the one who did not acknowledge his handicap even when the acknowledging individual was clearly nervous about doing so. Study Three employed an interview like situation in which a confederate of the experimenter appeared as either handicapped or nonhandicapped. In compairson to Ss who interacted with the nonacknowledging handicapped confederate, Ss who interacted with the handicapped confederate who acknowledged his handicap displayed significantly less discomfort and biased behaviors. There were no differences in the behavior of the Ss who interacted with the nonhandicapped confederate and those who interacted with the handicapped confederate who acknowledged his handicap. (Author/PHR)

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Effects of Acknowledgment of Handicap on Social Interactions

Jeffrey Wildfogel
Dartmouth College

Albert H. Hastorf
Stanford University

Paper presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, New York, September, 1979.

EXPERIMENTS I AND 2 AND A RELATED EXPERIMENT ARE MORE FULLY REPORTED IN THE JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, OCTOBER, 1979.

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Abstract

Non-handicapped people often experience discomfort and uncertainty when interacting with handicapped individuals. As a result of their discomfort and uncertainty, non-handicapped people usually exhibit biased, inhibited behavior in the presence of handicapped individuals. The three studies reported here investigated a possible tactic that handicapped people could use to reduce a fellow interactant's discomfort and uncertainty, and thereby, the resulting biased behavior. In studies 1 and 2, non-handicapped subjects watched two videotapes of paraplegics in a wheelchair being interviewed. Each subject then chose the handicapped person with whom he or she would prefer to work. In Study 1, subjects significantly preferred a handicapped person who acknowledged his handicap to one who did not acknowledge his handicap. In Study 2, subjects still preferred the acknowledging handicapped individual over the one who did not acknowledge his handicap even when the acknowledging individual was clearly nervous about doing so. Study 3 employed an

interviewlike situation in which a confederate of the experimenter appeared as either handicapped or non-handicapped. In comparison to subjects who interacted with the nonacknowledging handicapped confederate, subjects who interacted with the handicapped confederate who acknowledged his handicap displayed significantly less discomfort and biaded behaviors. There were no differences in the behavior of the subjects who interacted with the non-handicapped confederate and those who interacted with the handicapped confederate who acknowledged his handicap.

Non-handicapped people often experience discomfort and uncertainty when interacting with the handicapped (Davis, 1961; Kleck, Ono, and Hastorf, 1966; Kleck, 1968). As a result of this discomfort and uncertainty the behavior of the non-handicapped toward the non-handicapped is often biased. Kleck and his colleagues found that when interacting with a handicapped person, non-handicapped people are more inhibited in their behavior, distort their opinions in the direction of the stereotype of what handicapped people like to hear, gesture less, and end the interaction sooner than they do than when interacting with a non-handicapped individual (Kleck, et al., 1966; Kleck, 1968). More recent findings indicate that the non-handicapped give the handicapped inaccurate and, in general, less critical feedback than they do other non-handicapped individuals (Hastorf, Northcraft, and Picciotto, 1979; Sigall and Page, 1972).

These biases on the part of the non-handicapped inadvertently serve to make the physically handicapped the socially handicapped as well. Since the handicapped do not receive accurate feedback concerning the appropriateness of their own behavior or experience the normal behaviors of others it is likely that their social development is impaired. In addition, both Kleck (1969) and Hastorf, et al. (1979) suggest that the feedback the handicapped receive from the non-handicapped may result in the handicapped having a negative self-concept.

What can be done to improve the lot of the handicapped? The discomfort of the non-handicapped in interactions with the handicapped seems to be a major cause of the psycho-social barriers facing the handicapped. It therefore seems reasonable that any tactic that reduces

this discomfort would both facilitate interactions between the handicapped and non-handicapped and serve to increase the handicapped individual's opportunity to learn appropriate social skills and behavior.

The present series of investigations explored the tactic of acknowledging the handicap in interactions between handicapped and non-handicapped individuals. The first study tested the hypothesis that non-handicapped people would prefer to interact with and have more favorable attitudes toward handicapped individuals who acknowledged their handicap in a manner that showed they were not overly sensitive about it. The second study tested the hypothesis that even if handicapped invididuals displayed mild tension while acknowledging their handicap, non-handicapped people would still prefer to interact with them rather than with handicapped individuals who did not acknowledge their handicap. The third study tested the hypothesis that the acknowledgment tactic would increase the comfort of the non-handicapped and attenuate the biased behaviors that they usually exhibit in the presence of handicapped individuals.

Experiment 1

This first study investigated whether non-handicapped male and female college students prefer a handicapped confederate who acknowledged his handicap over another who did not. It was hypothesized that non-handicapped subjects would anticipate being more at ease with the acknowledging confederate and therefore would have more favorable impressions of him and choose to interact with him. In this study, subjects watched two videotapes, each of a paraplegic in a wheelchair being interviewed.

The videotapes differed only in how the confederate responded to the question, "How do you feel about yourself and your college experience up to this point?" In the acknowledging interview, the confederate spoke of the problems of being in a wheelchair but said that he had learned to accept the inconveniences. He mentioned that he realized people were afraid to talk about his handicap but that he encouraged them to ask questions anyway; only in this way could his handicap be gotten out of the way so that people could really get to know him. In the non-acknowledgment interview, the confederate responded that college life was agreeable, school work kept him rather busy, and he had recently began to play clarinet in the school orchestra.

After watching each interview, subjects rated the handicapped interviewee on an impression scale. After the second rating, subjects also chose which handicapped person they would prefer to work with in a second session.

Significantly more subjects (71 percent) chose to work with the confederate who acknowledged his handicap than with the non-acknowledging confederate, $X^2(1)=7.52$, $p<.01$. Seventy-nine percent of the subjects who chose the acknowledging confederate reported that the acknowledgment was an important factor in their decision. These subjective reports provide evidence that it was the handicap acknowledgment that exerted a major influence on subjects' preferences. Furthermore, the acknowledging confederate was rated more favorably on the evaluative and potency factors of the impression scale and was perceived as more likeable and better adjusted, smallest $t(47)=2.02$, $p<.05$. This first study supported the hypothesis that acknowledging the handicap is an effective tactic for

increasing partner preference. In addition, it also suggested that the acknowledging tactic may be successful because it introduces the handicapped person as someone who is not overly sensitive about his handicap.

Experiment 2

Will handicapped individuals be able to effectively use the acknowledgment tactic? Handicapped invididuals may often be sensitive about their handicaps, and will probably not be able to use the tactic of acknowledging their handicap without showing at least mild tension and anxiety. To test the strength of the acknowledgment tactic, a second study explored the consequences of a handicapped individual showing signs of mild tension and anxiety while acknowledging the handicap. It was hypothesized that even when handicapped individuals nonverbally communicate mild nervousness while acknowledging their handicap, non-handicap subjects would still have more favorable impressions of, and choose to interact with them.*

The procedure of this study was virtually identical to that of Experiment 1, except that a "nervous" handicap acknowledgment interview replaced the handicap acknowledgment one of the first experiment. The

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*It was hypothesized that if the handicapped individual communicated severe nervousness while acknowledging the handicap, the severe nervousness would lead non-handicapped people to feel that it was not acceptable to talk about the handicap. Consequently, the non-handicapped might feel even more uncomfortable around a handicapped person who showed (non-verbally) severe discomfort about being handicapped while verbally insisting otherwise. This hypothesis should be tested by varying the amount of discomfort a handicap person displays while acknowledging his or her handicap and measuring the preferences or behavior of the non-handicapped subject.

verbal text of the interviews remained unchanged. In the "nervous" interview, however, during most of the acknowledgment the confederate attempted to display discomfort by avoiding eye-contact, running his hand through his hair, and clasping his hands tightly together.

Even when the confederate evidenced nervousness while acknowledging his handicap subjects still tended to prefer him, $X^2(1)=3.52$, $p< .07$. Seventy-four percent of subjects choosing the acknowledging confederate identified the handicap-acknowledgment as an important factor in their decision and approximately one quarter of this group chose the nervous confederate despite acknowledging that the nervous confederate was not comfortable with his own handicap. Apparently, then, some subjects may have chosen the nervous confederate because he was trying to cope with his handicap.

Experiment 3

Will the acknowledgment tactic increase the comfort of the non-handicapped and attenuate their biased behavior toward the handicap? Experiment three was conducted to test this hypothesis. Non-handicapped subjects interacted with either a non-handicapped or handicapped confederate in a structured interviewlike situation. The handicapped confederate had either acknowledged or not acknowledged his handicap during a tape recorded interview made for the benefit of the non-handicapped subject. Since both tapes were made prior to the experimental sessions and the confederate was never present when the subject listened to the tape, the confederate was always blind concerning whether the subject was in the acknowledgment or non-acknowledgment condition. It was

hypothesized that subjects who interacted with the handicap-acknowledging confederate would be rated as being more comfortable and exhibit less biased behaviors than those subjects who interacted with the handicapped confederate who did not acknowledge his handicap.

As predicted, in comparison to subjects who interacted with the handicapped confederate who did not acknowledge his handicap, more subjects who interacted with the handicap-acknowledging confederate were rated as comfortable by independent ratings of both the confederate and a hidden observer, $X^2(1)=4.51$, $p \leq .05$. Both the confederate and observer were blind as to whether the subject had heard the acknowledgment or non-acknowledgment tape. The observer, being able to see only the subject because of a screen which blocked the confederate from view, was also blind concerning whether the confederate was handicapped or not. In addition, the statements made by the subjects in the unstructured situation immediately following the end of the interview between the confederate and subject were tape recorded and later rated for their friendliness by an independent rater who was blind concerning both whether the confederate was handicapped or non-handicapped, and whether he had acknowledged his handicap or not. Statements made to the handicapped confederate who acknowledged his handicap were rated as more friendly, $t(38)=2.85$, $p < .01$. Finally subjects interacting with the handicap-acknowledging confederate showed some tendency to talk more during the time they were alloted to answer the confederate's questions, $t(38)=1.62$, $p < .12$, and as a group exhibited a significantly less extreme number of body movements, $X^2(1)=8.90$, $p < .005$. As suggested by Mehrahian and Friar (1969), extremes in behavior may be another sign of discomfort.

Therefore, it would seem that this is another indication that the subjects who interacted with the handicap-acknowledging confederate were more comfortable.

Subjects interacting with the non-handicapped confederate did not significantly differ from the subjects interacting with the handicap-acknowledging confederate in any of the measures mentioned above. Somewhat puzzling, there were no differences between any of the three groups in their impressions formed, opinions expressed, or interaction distance.

Discussion

It has been well documented that handicapped individuals are the recipient of biased behaviors on the part of the non-handicapped and that these biases could have negative implications for the social skills and self-concepts of the handicapped. The three studies reported here examined one tactic, acknowledging the handicap, that can be used to attenuate the biased reactions of the non-handicapped. These three studies have shown that the tactic of acknowledging the handicap can lead to more positive impressions of the handicapped, a preference to interact with a handicapped person who has acknowledged the handicap, and perhaps most importantly, less biased behavior when the non-handicapped do interact with the handicapped. It is suggested, therefore, that the handicapped be trained in social skills (such as acknowledging their handicap) that help put the non-handicapped at ease. Such an approach may be more effective in increasing the opportunities the handicapped have for developing other of their social skills and improving their self-concept than approaches aimed at changing the attitudes of the

non-handicapped. Just as importantly, this approach gives the handicapped an active role in determining the social outcomes they receive rather than the passive one of depending on the non-handicapped to change their attitudes toward the handicapped.

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